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INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM, INR/B
STATE PASS USAID FOR ASIA/SCAA
USFOR-A FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2020

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SUBJECT: KANDAHAR'S POWERBROKER: GUL AGHA SHIRZAI: TEEING UP THE ENDGAME IN THE SOUTH?

Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Deputy Director Hoyt Yee
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶11. (S) Summary. Kandahar uber-powerbrokers Gul Agha Shirzai and Ahmed Wali Karzai (AWK) teamed up February 16-17 for an unprecedented show of political togetherness in Kandahar City (KC) to showcase plans for a southern Afghanistan regional peace and reconciliation jirga. Shirzai told the Kandahar PRT (KPRT) that his proposal involves: 1) an "active ISAF military posture" that keeps up the pressure on the Taliban; and 2) international community financial resources. Shirzai critiqued current Kandahar Governor Weesa's performance and qualifications in a meeting with the PRT, calling for a strong, dynamic governor who has a jihadi background and is close to the tribes. Despite the remarkable joint appearances of Shirzai and AWK, Shirzai later hedged on whether AWK is fully on board with the peace jirga, and a close aide to AWK hinted that AWK is not jumping at the proposal for now, anyway. Both camps are probably thinking endgame tactics for the war in the South, with Kandahar as the prize. Whatever the motivations of both men, if the proposal is serious, Shirzai and AWK might be successful in reconciling significant Taliban in the south -- especially if they decided to work reintegration and reconciliation together.
End Summary.

Peace and Reconciliation Jirga South

¶12. (S) Nangahar Governor (and Kandahar powerbroker) Shirzai came to Kandahar City (KC) on February 16-17 to shop his concept for a Peace and Reconciliation Jirga on the model of a provincial version used in Shinwar Valley in Nangahar. Last July, the Shinwaris organized to keep insurgents out, encourage reconciliation among those open to it and to attract reconstruction projects from the PRT in Jalalabad. During a two hour meeting at the PRT on February 17, Shirzai told the PRT that after some initial hesitation (NFI) he got behind the project. The ten-man Nangahar delegation that Shirzai brought with him to KPRT told a story of success, including defending their territory against insurgents during the elections and seeing the reconciliation of "hundreds" of Taliban.

¶13. (S) After hosting a "feast" for Shirzai in Kandahar City on February 16, AWK appeared February 17 with him at a shura attended by about 1500 people at the Governor's compound. (Note: Governor Weesa was in Kabul during the event and told KPRT that he knew nothing of the shura held at his residence in his absence. End Note) Shirzai proposed to the shura that key leaders convene a Peace and Reconciliation Jirga in Kandahar that would be joined by delegations from Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan provinces to form a South Regional Peace and Reconciliation Jirga.

¶14. (S) At the shura, Shirza said that based on the Nangahar

model, the jirga would include a militia-like defense component (best linked to the Afghan National Border Police (ANBP), Shirzai improbably said) that would also be empowered to arrest Taliban members or supporters who would, in turn, be subject to AFN 1 million (approximately USD 20,000) fines, having their homes burned down and internal exile for collaboration. The jirga would be empowered to vet all persons arrested by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to make its own determination about who should be prosecuted and who should be let go. With regard to reconciliation, each tribe would process its own people with the international community, underwriting both the costs of the jirga itself and the reconciliation process.

According to Shirzai, this is the way to win the war in the south "without bullets -- only money."

Criticizing Weesa

¶5. (S) Current Kandahar Governor Tooryalai Weesa (who was not present) received scathing criticism from Shirzai who said that Weesa is "weak" and isolated to the point of "being in prison" in his own offices. Weesa has no tribal shura operating with him in the province and no tribal roots of his own, Shirzai said. In fact, Shirzai added, Weesa's "door is closed to the tribes" and he has been foot-dragging on the establishment of a tribal shura. The only supporting political body operating in the province, Shirzai said, is the Provincial Council (chaired by AWK) with which Shirzai said he had "friendly relations." Shirzai repeatedly contrasted his own "dynamic," "strong," "jihadi," "tribal" leadership style to that of Weesa. In response to the PRT's

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question of whether he would consider coming back to Kandahar, Shirzai demurred, coyly citing much work he has to do in Nangahar.

International Community Role

¶6. (S) Shirzai informed KPRT, which was in listening mode, that the international community role in support of the Peace and Reconciliation Jirga would be to pay "salaries and expenses" of jirga members, underwrite the larger reconciliation effort nationally and keep the pressure on the Taliban militarily. Under these conditions, Shirzai said, the tribal leadership could vet and integrate its own "dissatisfied brothers," while punishing or exiling the hardcore. Shirzai portrayed himself as without equal in the country in dealing with tribes and tribal dynamics. (Comment: Given Shirzai's relatively weaker political position vis-a-vis the Karzai family in the GIRoA/Kabul context, it is no surprise that he might prefer to take them on from a tribal/provincial angle of approach. End Comment.)

Separate Meeting with Haji Agha Lalai Dastegeeri

¶7. (S) In a February 18 meeting with KPRT, AWK Provincial Council Deputy Dastegeeri was open but cool to the Peace and Reconciliation Jirga proposal. There had been more than a dozen attempts over the past few years to convene some type of reconciliation jirga, and none had been successful, he said. He said that if both AWK and Gul Agha Shirzai truly committed to the concept of a jirga in the South; and if Kabul supported the idea; and if the international community agreed to underwrite it, it was worth doing. To the question regarding Shirzai's motives for proposing the jirga now, Dastegeeri speculated that either he was "sent by Kabul" (NFI) to assess the prospects or perhaps he was attempting to re-establish his political base in Kandahar.

Comment

¶8. (S) KPRT has heard a couple different versions of the Nangahar Peace and Reconciliation Jirga story from local Kandaharis and, while they may vary, all reflect Shirzai's ambition to turn the reconciliation issue to his personal political benefit -- preferably on the national stage. We believe that AWK has the same agenda, and so the question becomes whether they contest the issue here in the South or split it up. Both men seem more than willing to volunteer us to do the fighting to make reconciliation an attractive option for the Taliban and to pay the bills for the program itself. Their part in the enterprise would be managing the tricky politics. The payoff could be big: an avenue toward a political solution to the conflict, plus the possibility of integrating a reformed Taliban into their respective political base. As calculating as Shirzai and Karzai may seem at the moment, if either or both acting together could actually deliver significant Taliban from the battlefield to the political sphere, their motives might seem less important. That said, given the enmity and the possibility each probably sees to run the table on the other, that looks like a long shot at this point.

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